

Cablefax Daily™

WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

Here to Stay: Programmers Reflect on COVID-19 Lessons Learned

Programmers were forced to get creative when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down studio lots and live sports last year, and the lessons taken from this time won't be forgotten any time soon.

"It's an old adage but with great challenge comes great opportunity, especially for innovation," **ESPN** svp, production and remote events *Matt Gross* told **CFX**. "At the end of the day, this has served as a reminder that anything is possible."

The start of the pandemic was all about prioritization, determining what programming would be able to fill empty holes in timeslots, what productions would be the first to begin when all was safe again, the latest safety protocols and what technology could be used to keep people as socially distanced as possible.

"From a production standpoint, during the sports stoppage the top priority was determining how to produce new, never-before-seen content in a way that would match the high standards that fans have come to expect from ESPN," Gross said. "It was an opportunity to be inventive." The network began developing content around classic game airings, produced NBA HORSE events and so much other programming that typically may not have been on its radar.

It also leaned on professional sports gaming events, which ESPN vp, digital media programming *John Lasker* said have historically resonated with the network's audience, particularly in younger demographics. Programs like the "Madden NFL 20 Celebrity Tournament" and the "NBA 2K Players Tournament"

helped to fill the void of traditional sports and delivered some much-needed excitement. ESPN plans to continue to incorporate gaming events into its programming lineup.

Crown Media Family Networks is keeping all safety protocols in place for the foreseeable future. "I think that in all facets of our lives, people will be more cognizant of health considerations and take more precautions to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, whether it's a common cold, the flu or something more serious," Crown Media evp, programming *Michelle Vicary* said. "There are certain learned, adaptive behaviors that have become ingrained over the last year for individuals and organizations, and our productions are no exception."

Crown Media was able to keep its daily lifestyle program "Home & Family" going by shooting episodes remotely from its co-hosts' and family members' homes, but their original movies were a different story. Production was put on hold through June, but the programming teams themselves were working harder than ever.

"The programming department took that extra time as an opportunity to revisit current productions and those in development, to hone storylines, further develop character arcs and make each project even stronger. As an organization, we were compelled to find creative solutions to communicate and stay connected, and because of those efforts, the culture at Crown Media is the strongest it has ever been," Vicary said.

Game Show Network also embraced creativity and has been able to safely film more than 260 new episodes during

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the pandemic. Thinking outside the box allowed the network to maintain as much normalcy as possible in their productions while also ensuring the safety of contestants and crew. “The way they set it up, there is an audience, but it’s the contestants from the other shows being shot and the shows being shot that day. It isn’t the same set up. It isn’t shot like it has a full audience, but at least the host and the contestants have someone to play to,” Game Show Networks programming head *Fran Shea* said. “You see it more in the personality of the show rather than the overhead shots of the audience coming in.”

A number of the broadcasting methods that ESPN has developed could be continued even after the pandemic is over. Gross said that includes its “Live From Home” technology or the hybrid production models that have limited the number of personnel needed on site.

“Health and safety will always be a priority, as well as serving the fan,” Gross said. “During the last year, we’ve gained so much experience about how to do both.”

BIG EXEC SHUFFLE AT COMCAST

Lots of changes over at **Comcast**, with kudos to *Light Reading’s Jeff Baumgartner* for getting the scoop. Longtime Comcast exec *Tony Werner* is stepping down as president of **Comcast Cable’s** Technology, Product and Experience unit, but will remain with the company as senior technology adviser to the CEO and will spearhead some special projects. Werner said he’s not retiring, but taking on a lighter load after 40 years in the industry. *Charlie Herrin*, most recently evp, chief product officer, will move into the TPX president role. It’s a big job, with Herrin long viewed as the heir apparent. Plenty of other high-level changes were outlined in

a memo by Comcast Cable chief *Dave Watson* Thursday. Central Division president *Bill Connors* was named to the role of Xfinity president. It’s a new operating unit that essentially has him overseeing the end-to-end customer experience, combining consumer services with the customer experience. Connors will work closely with the regions and TPX. *Christine Whitaker*, most recently svp, finance and administration for Comcast’s Northeast division, becomes the new Comcast Central division president. It marks the first time a woman has held one of the division president roles. She joins West Division president *Rich Jennings* and Northeast Division head *Kevin Casey*. The shuffle follows *Dana Strong’s* move from president, consumer services at Comcast Cable to group CEO of **Sky**. Comcast Cable also named its first svp, chief diversity officer, with *Loren Hudson* taking on the role. Hudson, most recently vp, HR for Comcast’s Beltway and Keystone units, reports to Comcast corporate chief diversity officer *Dalila Wilson-Scott*.

FTC READY TO MAKE SOME RULES

FTC chair *Rebecca Kelly Slaughter* is looking to up the agency’s rulemaking authority, establishing a rulemaking group within the Office of General Counsel. The idea is to establish new rulemakings, with Slaughter stating that activity in recent decades has been mostly around periodic review of existing rules. The new group also will provide a centralized hub for rulemakings instead of relying on individual bureaus. “I believe that we can and must use our rulemaking authority to deliver effective deterrence for the novel harms of the digital economy and persistent old scams alike,” Slaughter said in a statement. “It is also time for the Commission to activate its unfair methods of competition rulemaking authority in our

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increasingly concentrated economy, and I am excited for this new rulemaking group to explore all the possibilities.”

FOX SPORTS BETS ON HORSE RACING

Fox Sports and the **NY Racing Association** extended their partnership agreement so that Fox is the official wagering partner of NYRA Bets, a horse racing wagering platform that launched in 2016 and is available across 30 states. Fox Sports intends to exercise its option under its previous agreement to acquire a 25% stake in NYRA Bets by this summer. The new agreement provides a Fox Sports subsidiary with the opportunity to further increase its equity interest in NYRA Bets down the line. It also extends Fox Sports' NYRA TV rights package 10 years through 2030.

SPORTS REFUNDS STILL IN THE NEWS

Video providers ranging from **Comcast** to **Verizon** promised early on in the pandemic that they would return refunds for live sports programming that didn't air to customers, and NY Attorney General *Letitia James* let her constituents know Thursday that she's making sure it happens. James announced that New Yorkers have received approximately \$76 million in rebates following her letters last April to seven major cable and satellite providers in NY. The AG's Office said her discussions with MVPDs have resulted in additional commitments from companies, totaling tens of millions of dollars more in relief that will be delivered later this year.

FOX'S COMCAST PROGRAMMATIC PLAY

Fox Corp has partnered with **FreeWheel, a Comcast Company**, to enable programmatic trading of addressable set-top box VOD. It's an industry first for a television network, with Fox able to offer advertisers household-level campaign on any of its content viewed on demand in the Comcast footprint. It applies to the entire Fox portfolio, including AVOD **Tubi**, which is available on X1, Xfinity Flex and **Cox Contour** devices. **The Trade Desk** is the first demand side platform to complete the integration, enabling advertisers to execute addressable guaranteed campaigns on Fox VOD inventory.

WHO'S DOWN WITH EBB?

More than 100 **ACA Connects members**, including **Blue Ridge, Service Electric** and **WOW!**, are on track to participate in the FCC's \$3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit Program. ACAC said these providers collectively pass more than 10 million homes, with most offering service of at least 100/20Mbps. The association said a majority of the providers are non-Eligible Telecommunications Carriers that filed their applications with the FCC by the priority application deadline, which guarantees them a decision before the program starts whether they are approved to participate. Cable pushed to make sure ETC status wasn't a prerequisite of participation in the program, which provides eligible low-income households with discounts of up to \$50 a month for broadband service, and up to \$75 a month if the household is on Tribal lands. Larger operators, including **Charter** and **Comcast**, have indicated they plan to participate. The FCC's expected to roll out the program next month.

FOX NEWS, TBS TOP RATINGS CHART

March Madness came in like a lion, pushing **TBS** to the #2 spot last week in primetime viewers among ad-supported

cable. TBS' 1.9 million viewers wasn't enough to topple **Fox News** from the top spot, with the newser averaging nearly 2.3 million. **MSNBC** took third with 1.7 million viewers in prime, followed by TBS' fellow **NCAA** Men's tourney network **TNT** (1.35 million). **TruTV**, which also carried hoops action, ranked 14th with 654,000 viewers, up from 211,000 the previous week.

CBS SPORTS DEALS

CBS Sports reached a multiplatform agreement to be the exclusive US home to the Serie A Championship, the Coppa Italia and the Supercoppa Italiana. You gotta assume **Mediacom** CEO (and **ACF Fiorentina** owner) *Rocco Commisso* played a part in this. In fact, he was specifically thanked for his role in reaching the agreement by **Lega Serie A** CEO *Luigi De Siervo*. **Paramount+** will stream more than 400 club matches live each season through 2024. Select matches will also be televised each year on CBS Sports linear platforms. Coverage begins in August with the start of the 2021-2022 Serie A season. Additional coverage details to come in conjunction with the 2021-2022 Serie A and Coppa Italia schedules. **CBS Sports Digital** will feature additional coverage and original programming, and provide highlights across social channels and **CBS Sports HQ**, the 24/7 streaming sports news network. Paramount+ also recently scored a multiplatform deal with the **Argentine Football Division** to serve as the English-language home in the US of the Liga Profesional de Fútbol, Copa de la Liga Profesional, and, beginning in 2022, the Supercopa Argentina. The streamer will have every club competition match live each season through 2024. Starting Friday, Paramount+ will stream all 423 remaining matches in 2021.

DOING GOOD

Univision launched a national bilingual vaccine hotline with **Mi Familia Vota** to give viewers access to accurate info and personalized assistance. The programmer also kicked off a multiplatform, month-long COVID-19 vaccine programming effort that includes virtual townhalls and weekly integrations on “Despierta America.”

GAME SHOW NETWORK UPFRONT

Game Show Network announced a development deal with **WWE Studios**. The two will work together to develop new game formats and showcase WWE talent as hosts. Projects will be produced by WWE Studios for Game Show Network. The net boasted at its upfront Thursday that it's one of the 10 biggest networks for growth in total day and prime. Shows with new eps coming in 2021 include “Master Mind” and “People Puzzler.”

ON THE CIRCUIT

Mediacom founder and CEO *Rocco Commisso* will give the keynote to Columbia Engineering students on Class Day, a virtual celebration April 29 for all bachelor's degree candidates of the School of Engineering and Applied Science. Commisso earned a bachelor of science in industrial engineering and operations research from Columbia in 1971 and his MBA from Columbia Business in 1975.

PEOPLE

Peter Faricy was named CEO of energy company **SunPower**, effective April 19. Faricy exited his role as CEO of global direct-to-consumer for **Discovery** in June.

PROGRAMMER'S PAGE

Disney Junior Puts Spotlight on Holi

Spring is almost here and cabin fever is coming back, but a certain young detective is bringing vibrant colors into our homes. “Mira, Royal Detective” premiered on **Disney Junior** March 20, just in time for Indian festival Holi on March 28 and 29. The show features an adolescent girl in her magical homeland of Jalpur, which is heavily influenced by India’s culture and customs. With a resourceful, can-do attitude, Mira lands herself an appointment to the role of royal detective by the Queen. The show features an episode called “The Holi Festival Mystery,” in which young Mira and her friends must track down two buckets full of missing colored balloons to save the city’s vibrant Holi festival. The episode, much like the holiday itself, is full of color. “India is such a colorful and vibrant country—we were going more into the hues of the oranges and the reds and the yellows, so we had to bring all of those to life. You see them all in the Holi episode, as we get into that episode itself and you see all the colors that come into play in ‘Mira, Royal Detective,’” said *Shagorika Ghosh Perkins*, cultural consultant and consulting producer for the series. The Holi festival is a celebration for the coming of spring and an opportunity for all to come together as one community. Shagorika said community and cultural diversity were two important themes for her while working on the show as a whole. “The diversity that I saw and experienced growing up India, I now see that here—I see that here and it’s beautiful and amazing,” Shagorika said, “so I just feel like it’s really important for kids, especially for kids who are at that age, to be able to see themselves and their culture recognized and represented and for others it opens up a whole new world, where they are probably going to learn and accept and celebrate these differences.” This special episode of Mira, Royal Detective will premiere on the network at 11am ET on Saturday. – *Theresa Maher*

REVIEWS

“Race to the Center of the Earth,” series premiere, 10pm, Monday, **National Geographic**. The series’ title is somewhat of a misnomer; nobody’s drilling into the Earth’s core. Instead, it’s Nat Geo’s first global competition, pitting four teams of young, fit people in a timed race. OK, it’s a well-worn format, but there are several twists that make it a compelling series. First, the teams are racing in different parts of the globe (N. America, SE Asia, Russia and S. America), so weather conditions are vastly different. Second, the scenery is breathtaking, and, fittingly for Nat Geo, footage is captured on high-tech cameras. Last, the routes harken to Nat Geo’s roots, including mountains, rivers and other out-of-the-way places. At times, the journey seems like a fast-paced travelogue, filled with exotic scenes and experiences. And it’s not that the 3-person teams are just out for fun. There’s \$1 million at stake for the trio that travels roughly its 5,000-km route the fastest. – “Ginny & Georgia,” streaming on **Netflix**. Similar to today’s first review, you’ve likely seen this format before—a stable, highly intelligent teen who ‘parents’ her wild, voluptuous, cunning mother. The series succeeds because it executes. Indeed, just when you think mother Georgja (*Brianne Howey*) is a stereotype, she fools us, and daughter Ginny (*Antonia Gentry*), with street-smarts. – *Seth Arenstein*

BASIC CABLE P2+ PRIME RANKINGS* (03/15/21-03/21/21)		
MON-SUN	MC US AA%	MC US AA (000)
FNC	0.725	2,233
TBSC	0.649	1,999
MSNBC	0.555	1,710
HGTV	0.390	1,202
CNN	0.354	1,090
HALL	0.344	1,060
TNT	0.325	1,000
HIST	0.281	865
DISC	0.248	764
FOOD	0.247	761
TRUTV	0.244	751
INSP	0.242	746
USA	0.239	737
TLC	0.235	723
ESPN	0.218	670
FX	0.194	599
ID	0.194	596
HMM	0.182	559
NATGEO	0.173	534
LIFE	0.171	528
A&E	0.166	512
TVLAND	0.166	510
SYFY	0.156	479
ADSM	0.140	430
AMC	0.136	419
NAN	0.128	393
BRAVO	0.128	393
WETV	0.122	376
GSN	0.119	368
BET	0.116	359
CRTN	0.115	355
NICK	0.114	352
APL	0.111	343
MTV	0.109	336

*P2+ L+SD rankers are based on national Nielsen numbers, not coverage.



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